THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

IN THE END, OUR BEGINNING

November 15, 1998
John M. Buchanan

Death was possible. I thought we'd be lucky if we didn't lose one or two. . . . I have since been asked why I did it. I did it because it was important for our country. . . . While I wasn't rushing to leave this life any more than anyone else, I have always felt that it is more important how you live your life than how long you live."

John Glenn
Presbyterian Elder, U.S. Senator
Astronaut, Space Shuttle Discovery
Reflecting on his first
Project Mercury orbital flight,
February 20, 1962

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 149
Luke 21:5-19
". . . the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another." Luke 21:6

Dear God, Sometimes the future seems so uncertain, so frightening—for the world and for ourselves—that we look for a safe place to hide. Find us in those places, O God, and help us to see the whole picture of your sovereign will at work. And give us faith to trust and to invest our lives in the work you have for us to do. Startle us with your truth and open our minds and our souls to your word of love and hope on Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

What you believe about the future, how things are going to turn out for the world and for yourself, has a great deal to do with how you live your life in the present.

Near the beginning of Arthur Miller's powerful drama, *The Death of a Salesman*, written fifty years ago and recently presented magnificently by The Goodman Theater, Willie Loman's adult sons have come home and are in their old bedroom reminiscing and talking about the good old days when they were boys together, and then their talk turns to the future—not nearly as pleasant as the past. The younger of the two, Happy, has a job, is trying to get ahead, and is as hopelessly optimistic as his father. The elder son, Biff, has not done so well and has chosen a counter culture life working as a ranch hand in the west. He says:

> "I'll tell you, Hap, I don't know what the future is. I don't know what I'm supposed to want." . . ."To devote your whole life to keeping stock or making phone calls. To suffer fifty weeks a year for a two-week vacation. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still, that's how you build a future."

His younger brother, Happy, responds:

> "All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager? I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. And still, I'm lonely."

As the play unfolds, the future begins to loom ominously, threateningly. Willie Loman, the quintessential salesman, is not going to realize his dreams of financial success, security, and prestige. It's all bluster and hype, a game of self-deception which everyone understands—his wife, his sons, his friend. He can't pay his bills, finally loses his job, his dignity, his purpose, and begins to invest what hope he has left in his own death. He imagines all the people who will come to his funeral.

"That funeral will be massive. They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire. And all the old-timers with the strange license plates. That boy will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized. I'm known, Ben."

And, of course, when it happens, only his family is there.

When the play ended, on the night I was privileged to see it, an interesting thing happened. Most of the audience was in tears. So was the cast. The applause was strong and sustained, and even when the final curtain fell, most of the audience remained seated for a few more minutes and took what seemed to me a long time to exit the theater.

It was almost as if everyone understood that we had not only shared an important artistic experience, but something else as well. We had, I believe, just experienced an encounter with what theologians and philosophers have always known is the fundamental human question, "Is there any hope—for the world and for me?"

How you view the future, the world's and your own personal destiny, has a lot to do with how you live your life. How you view the future has a lot to do with your soul, your spirituality, that interior place inside each one of us where we decide what the purpose of our lives is and then commit ourselves to it. Philosophers and poets have always paid a lot of attention to this topic.

One of T.S. Eliot's most distinguished poems, "East Coker," begins:

"In my beginning is my end"

and concludes:

"In my end is my beginning."

Macbeth, on the other hand:

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time . . . .
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing."

French existentialist Albert Camus said that a lot simpler and shorter, "Men die and they are not happy."

So, religion has always paid close attention to the basic question. There is a word for it. It is called, "eschatology," the study of last things, the end times, the summation of the whole project.

One of my favorite Bible scholars, Walter Brueggemann, warns that, "all this talk in the Bible about the end-time is intellectually difficult and pastorally problematic. End-time talk, which permeates the New Testament, is deeply incongruous with our intellectual world. Besides, none of us wants to sound like a religious crazy."

That's who seems to fasten onto eschatology—the poor souls who know what day and time the world is going to come to an end and who seem to long for it. My grandmother lived into her nineties, and the older she became, the more she drifted from her sane Presbyterianism, and spent her time reading her Bible and listening to radio preachers who told her the end was near, in between asking her for a great deal of her money. In a way I could never understand, the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the world seemed to be good news to her. I, on the other hand, had things to do, places to see. Like theologian Lewis Smedes, who when told that Jesus was coming again to take the faithful to heaven, prayed that Jesus would hold off until the Detroit Tigers won a World Series, I had set my personal aspirations on the Pittsburgh Pirates, and when they actually did it in October of 1960, I half expected the world to come to an end. Imagine the eschatological implications of those of us who, in these latter days, are willing to invest our hope, year after year, in the Chicago Cubs.

Our texts this morning are examples of Biblical eschatology, the end of things. Isaiah's prophecy was addressed to a community of people who had lived for a generation in another country as captives, exiles. In fact, the people who read this poem were born in Babylon. They had never seen Jerusalem. All they knew was what they heard about Mt. Zion, the stunning temple, the marble and gold, the shops, the streets, the houses. Now they had returned, and it was nothing like what they had been told. It was all rubble. The shops were all gone, empty for decades. The wind whistled down dreary and empty streets, the Temple was leveled, burned, desecrated, and destroyed.

I thought of those returning exiles and Isaiah's prophecy when we traveled in Croatia two years ago, representing the Presbyterian Church (USA). We visited UN Command Headquarters in Vukovar, a lovely, old Croatian city just beginning to be reoccupied by returning Croatians, and we saw the heartbreak and the tears as people came home to utter devastation. Their schools, hospitals, public buildings, libraries, churches, the soul of the community, had been deliberately destroyed—devastated.

That is the situation to which the prophet writes:

> "For I am about to create a
> new heaven
> and a new earth . . . .
> I am about to create Jerusalem
> as a joy
> no more shall the sound of
> weeping be heard in it.
> No more shall there be an infant that lives a few days
> or an old person who does not live out a life time.
> They shall build houses and inhabit them.
> They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

And the words of a prophet to a discouraged and frightened people were heard, and in spite of the enormous gap between their expectations and the reality, a few visionary people, people of hope and courage, raised their heads and saw God's powerful hand at work creating something new—a new future, a new hope, a new world, and they rolled up their sleeves and went to work to build that new world, that new future.

In the Gospel lesson, five centuries after Isaiah, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem again, including the unthinkable prediction that the Temple, the same one his ancestors lovingly and carefully rebuilt, would again be destroyed. The people who read Luke's words again are living in the midst of enormous tragedy and destruction. In 70 AD, a few years before Luke wrote his gospel, the Romans finally wearied of the persistent rebelliousness of their Jewish subjects, laid siege to Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and dispersed all its habitants. Christians were hunted down, arrested, tortured, executed. But Jesus, Luke reports, had said, "You will be hated because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

What does it mean to think like that when your world is falling down around you? What does it mean to have hope when things look hopeless?

Nothing that has happened in history has ever challenged the conviction that there is a good and sovereign God who is somehow in control of the whole enterprise more strenuously than the Holocaust. And no one has ever struggled with the theological implications more honestly and publicly than the brilliant Jewish author, Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, but witnessed the death there of his own father, family, and friends. Wiesel, over the years, in novels and essays, has expressed eloquently and passionately his doubts about God's goodness and mercy, about God's compassion, about God's existence in any meaningful way; expressed his anger and rage at God, at his people for believing in God.

But this year, at Rosh Hashanah, he wrote, "A Prayer for the Days of Awe." Let me read part of it for you.

> "Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?
> More than fifty years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many things good and less good have happened to those who survived it. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was re-created. Children were born, friendships struck. They learned to have faith in their surroundings, even in their fellow men and women. Gratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts. No one is as capable of thankfulness as they are. Thankful to anyone willing to hear their tales and become their ally in the battle against apathy and forgetfulness. For them every moment is grace."

Even in the death camps, prayers were said, hymns were sung, faith in God was affirmed; and even there, even in the darkest valley of the shadow of death, hope lived.

The basic message of the Bible is that no matter what is happening, no matter how bad things look, surrounded by your enemies, overcome by suffering, facing death itself, God the Creator is still God, God is on the side of life and justice and goodness, and because of

that, there is a better day coming. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.

The message of the Bible is that God is not bent on destroying the world in one final, fiery holocaust, but that God loves the world and has a purpose for the world and for each of us in it and is at work in history and in our personal lives to bring about that purpose of peace and justice and kindness and compassion. The message of the Bible is that God's sovereign will is never ultimately destroyed, regardless of bad things that are going on for the world or for us personally.

People who believe that become people of hope and courage; people who do not give up; people who persist in working for peace when there seems to be no reason; people who will not stop hoping and working for a safer world for our children, for fewer guns, for better schools, for more and better health care, for an economic system which extends its bounty and incredible opportunity to everyone, not just those of us who were born into it.

People of hope will be discouraged on occasion, but not paralyzed by depression; will hear God's promise and never stop working for a church that is faithful and just and compassionate and as inclusive as its Lord.

People of hope change the world because they know that regardless of how things look now, God is ultimately in charge, and the end is God's kingdom of justice and kindness and mercy and love.

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris has an essay on eschatology in which she explains the focus on the end of things, but also her experience that what we Christians believe about the end causes us to live lives of strong hope now. And she illustrates by telling about a friend, a brilliant scholar, stricken with cancer, over a period of several years of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, who almost died three times. Then, suddenly, the cancer went into remission. Her future is uncertain, to say the least, but she has returned to teaching and writing and, incredibly, she said, "I'd never want to go back because I know what each morning means and I'm so grateful just to be alive. We've been through so much together. And hasn't it been a blessing!"

Norris concludes, "That's eschatology."

Kathleen Norris' essay reminded me of a reunion I had recently with one of my oldest friends, in fact the only other Presbyterian in my Divinity School class. His name is Gary Hickok. He and Mary Jo had their children about the same time we did. We studied and learned together, were called to small Presbyterian churches after graduation, he in Southern Illinois, from which he called me one night in the early sixties to ask me to go with him to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to participate in a Civil Rights march. It cost $100, and I couldn't go with him. I didn't have the money. But he went and was arrested, and the good folks in that Southern Illinois town took a very dim view of the whole thing, so he moved shortly afterward, and before I knew it he was a manager for Carson-Pirie-Scott and then a very successful mortgage banker. A year ago, he started to get dizzy and have headaches, and the doctor told him he had a brain tumor that had to come out. We talked on the phone, and he told me that the operation would be very complicated and that there

was a fair amount of risk, and we laughed about our education and churches and Hattiesburg and the fact that maybe not having $100 saved me from a career as a banker.

During the surgery, the worst happened. In the process of removing a very complicated tumor, arteries and nerves around his eye were severed and, as the surgeons worked to try to correct the situation, Gary had a stroke. The very difficult surgery lasted 32 hours. He awoke without sight in one eye, very limited sight in the other, and paralyzed on his left side.

He told me he had never known before what the valley of the shadow of death was like. A strong, upbeat, resilient man, he sunk into the depth of depression. Confined to bed and the wheel chair, unable to take care of himself, and without much prospect of improvement, he stopped trying, even thought about ending it all. And then one day, at the worst time, his seven-year-old grandson came to visit him at the hospital. Gary didn't much want to see anyone, but finally consented.

His grandson came into the hospital room, looked at him, and said, impatiently, "Grandpa, are you ever gonna get up out of that wheel chair?" And Gary told me that, somehow from someplace deep inside, he was able to say, "Yes, Mike, by God, I am going to get out of this wheel chair."

And, as Gary ever-so-slowly got up out of the chair in which he was sitting and limped across the room to show me, I thought, "That's eschatology."

I remembered something I had read a long time ago. The great theologian, Karl Barth, said, "Hope takes place in the act of taking the next step."

We believe in God who is sovereign and who works in history and in our own lives to bring us to our destiny.

We believe in God's son, Jesus Christ, who experienced the worst life could be, and died our death, and rose again to free us from fear and to live lives of courage and hope.

We believe, as the poet put it, that "Our beginning is our end," and, "our end is our beginning."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.